DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 149 CD 032 870

AUTHOR Stebbins, Susan
TITLE The School Attitudes of a Group of Working-Class Girls.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Environment; Ethnography; *Females; Intermediate Grades; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; *School Culture; Self Esteem; Sex Differences; Sex Discrimination; Sex Role; *Student Attitudes; Urban Youth; *Working Class

ABSTRACT

Ethnographic field research done with a group of working class girls in upstate New York examined the structures of schools that maintain gender and class distinctions and the culture of the girls themselves. Most of the field work was participant-observation at after-school and summer programs at a Girls Incorporated site in a mid-sized industrialized city over four years. The field work concentrated on 25 girls. These students tended to see their learning experience as adversarial, being yelled at and told to be quiet. The subjects doubted their abilities and felt no real sense of involvement in their educational process. Findings also show the extent to which working class girls and women find themselves trying to catch up in a constantly changing world of middle-class standards, behaviors, and attitudes. Children, and especially girls, who attend schools that still stress rote learning, adherence to authority, and do not demand more academically of students, cannot compete for jobs and careers that require abstract and critical thinking skills. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

THE SCHOOL ATTITUDES OF A GROUP OF WORKING-CLASS GIRLS

By
Susan Stebbins

Department of Anthropology
SUNY College at Potsdam

ED 429 149

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Susan Stebbins
SUNY Potsdam

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UD032870

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE SCHOOL ATTITUDES OF A GROUP OF WORKING-CLASS GIRLS

SUSAN STEBBINS

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

SUNY COLLEGE AT POTSDAM

Recently much attention has been given to the different educational experiences, attitudes and expectations of girls and boys (Gilligan, Belenky, Lyons). Racial differences have received more attention for a longer period of time. But the educational experiences of the working-class, girls in particular, is an issue that has just recently been addressed (Weis:1990).

There are many reasons for this lack of interest. The issue of gender differences in classroom experiences has been acknowledged only recently. As for class, the belief is, some of them are poor, a few of them are rich, and most of us are middle-class. In the United States there is not the recognition of class difference based upon socio-economic status.

This paper is both an investigation of recent research that examines the multiple discriminators of gender, race and class, and an account of ethnographic field research done with a group of working-class teenage girls in upstate New York. It examines both structuralist conditions, the structures of schools which maintain gender and class distinctions; and culturalist condition, the culture of the girls themselves which also contributes to an unequal education. I believe the ethnographic accounts affirm many of the points made by researchers such as Weis (1990) about the educational experiences and attitudes of working-class girls.

The bulk of my fieldwork was participant-observation at after-school and summer programs at a Girls Incorporated (formerly Girls Club) site in a mid-size de-industrialized city over a four year period. I also conducted observations in elementary and middle-schools attended by Girls Incorporated members for several months. While this Girls Incorporated affiliate provided services to several hundred different girls during this time, my field work concentrated on twenty-five girls, most of whom were participating in Girls Incorporated programs throughout those four years. The girls were from white, Afro-American and mixed

UD032870

race families. Historically, Girls Incorporated has provided services to the daughters of working-class families, particularly in factory and mill cities of the northeast.

Class position can be determined on the basis of occupation and its economic rewards. However, I believe the level and quality of education must also be taken into account, for it is this factor which often determines the occupational opportunities of an individual. Additionally, there are behaviors, attitudes, and language codes which not only serve to identify an individual as a member of a particular class, but also limit the quality of education that an individual receives and ultimately the types of occupations for which she will be qualified. This is a cyclical process in which both educational institutions and individual students participate. Schools expect and reward certain attitudes, behaviors, and language use. Students who do not exhibit this expected "cultural capital" do not receive the same quality or level of education as those students who do. Indeed, the expectation is that they will not succeed academically. On the other hand, students who do not have this "cultural capital" (frequently women, students of color or non-dominant ethnic backgrounds, and the working-class student), who see no reward for academic success, maintain attitudes, behaviors and language usage which limits their academic success, affirming the expectation that they will not succeed. For the purposes of this investigation, class difference is those behaviors, attitudes, and language which limit the level and quality of an individual's education and ultimately her access to an economically self-sufficient occupation.

Education should of course be more than educating individuals for careers. However, in a society in which individuals suffer multiple discriminators which hinder their access to a quality education and limits their abilities to be economically self-sufficient, the unequal status of schools and education, which limits access to economically self-sufficient jobs, must be examined.

Class difference can be viewed clearly in public schools, which have been a strong force of acculturation to middle-class values. Historically, schools which served the children of immigrants, and the children of the men and women who worked in factories and mills

emphasized the type of skills which would be necessary for the same kind of work as their parents. Working-class children were taught basic skills, through rote methods, and obedience to the rules. In Schooling In Capitalist America, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) demonstrate that in schools serving working-class children the curriculum reproduced the culture these children would encounter at the workplace. This is not the white-collar, middle-class workplace which places some value on initiative, flexibility and ambition, but the blue-collar workplace in which workers are expected to respect authority, follow the rules, and conform. Education which focused on flexibility and critical thinking was more likely to be found in schools which served middle-class children, and such children were more apt to go to college and eventually assume professional careers, rather than physical labor. Despite the shift in the United States from blue-collar physical labor to white-collar service and management careers, schools continue to educate children in ways which are not appropriate for the increasing majority of jobs available (Weis 1990:199-201, 1992 Bureau of Statistics, Table 657, 658, and 663).

Like racially or ethnically different children, those children from working-class families are also seen as "other" by their generally middle-class teachers. Working-class families are perceived to use an inferior form or style of language, have different or lower stands of behavior, and different attitudes about education.

On the other hand, working-class students and their families often behave in ways that limit the quality of the students' education, and ultimately limit their future expectations. Researchers such as Paul Willis (1977), Jay MacLeod (1987), and Douglas Foley (1990), have observed the "passive resistance" syndrome. This syndrome includes behaviors in which students share homework and test answers, are content to merely pass a class, and engage in manipulating behaviors that enable them to have greater control of the classroom. They will ask irrelevant questions, or get teachers started on topics which they know will divert them from the planned classwork.

Additionally, to accept middle-class values, to do well in school would mean that students must break away from their peer groups. The behaviors of these peer groups; not studying, "sharing" homework and tests, skipping classes, and dropping out, are at odds with behaviors necessary for success in school. If students acquire the "cultural capital", i.e. the language, behaviors and attitudes needed to succeed in schools, they find themselves in the position of having to choose between maintaining them or behaviors which will keep their friends.

The previously mentioned research focused on boys. Indeed, there is little research specifically on working-class girls, and what there is largely focused on juvenile delinquency. Many of the conditions of working-class life, such as having a working mother, are perceived as factors contributing to delinquency. In her book Working Class without Work, Lois Weis (1990) did deal with the needs of working-class teen girls. Based on her research and my own, it appears that working-class girls, like the boys, are content to just get through and "pass" their classes. For example, one of the teens in my research, seventh-grader Lynette, when asked how she had done on her recent report card replied, "I passed". Even in cases in which girls are doing well academically, they will "share" homework and test answers, and skip classes.

Dotty is a sixth-grader who had a great deal of difficulty gaining acceptance with any social group. The other girls referred to her as a "whiner" who "sucked up to adults". However, during a summer program Dotty was able to achieve some acceptance by the group when she announced she had a court-appointed case worker because she had been skipping school. As with boys, this was approved behavior by this particular social group.

Occasionally the girls themselves seem to exhibit an awareness of class difference. Betty, a bright teenager who participated in my study, described the students of her school as being either "yups" or "tufs". Betty had identified with the "tufs" but now wanted to break out of the cycle of drinking, drug-use and sexual activity associated with this group. But to do so meant breaking away from her social group as well. Betty told me she wasn't a "yup" and

she saw no other alternatives at her school. For Betty, an already difficult change of behavior was made more difficult by the loss of her social group.

The appropriate behaviors of social groups such as Betty's "tufs" are frequently at odds with the "cultural capital" which is needed for success in school. Both my interviews with the girls and my observations in the schools document a "culture" in which students engage in behaviors which detract from their studies. I conducted repeated observations in a seventh grade science class in which several Girls Incorporated members were students. I noted the girls always arrived to class early and sat in groups at long tables in the front of class. The boys tended to arrive just in time or late, and sat individually at desks or tables in the back. On the surface, the behavior of the girls in arriving early and sitting up front would seem to indicate an interest and attention to the teacher. But in fact, from my vantage point I could see and hear the girls talking to each other throughout the class, passing papers, and thumbing through books or their backpacks.

One incident is particularly illustrative of this behavior. Tanya came to class one morning with her hair newly done in beads and braids. From the moment she came into class girls asked where she had gotten her hair done, who had done it, and how long it had taken. Tanya was enjoying the attention. When the class finally settled down a bit and started answering questions from worksheets, Tanya spent a good deal of time shaking her head to make the beads rattle, and tossing the strands back and smiling at the boys and girls behind her.

This is just one example of the lack of attention students gave to the teachers' lessons, reading, or the answering of questions. Both boys and girls didn't "pay attention", but they did so in different ways. The boys tended to sit alone and stare out windows, draw, or read comic books. The girls talk to each other or passed notes. The girls tended to be more active in class, but this activity also detracted from the planned lessons. They would ask irrelevant questions, talk about television shows, or share school gossip. This is not behavior which demonstrates

interest in the class or the teacher, but behavior which manipulates what happens in the class and detracts from academics.

These observations were backed up by interviews with the girls. When I asked Donna what the teacher had discussed in a particular class she replied, "Oh you know, blah, blah, blah." She said a social studies class had been "a good class" because the girls and boys had gotten in an argument about women umpires which had taken up the class time. When she described her school day to me she said the most important thing was to get to class early so "you can sit next to your friends". When I asked why this was so important, she replied, "so you can talk and pass notes and answers". Donna and her friends had a system for sharing answers to tests. Seated af long tables, they write the answer at the top of the table, and then after a few minutes cough and rub the answer out with their thumbs. She also told me she and her friends would divide homework assignments and "share" the answers over the phone.

Donna knew this was cheating, but rationalized her behavior as a way of "getting through the work." It is interesting that both students and teachers referred to the academic process as "getting through the work." For Donna and her friends, and their teachers, the process was "getting through" the required modules and tests. While never directly confronting the teacher, or just not the doing the work, the "passive resistance" of Donna and her friends was successful because of certain structures within the school. Donna's homework was never checked. The teacher just noted if it was done or not. Work sheets and modules (generally reading from a book and answering questions on worksheets) were such that answers could easily be shared.

In addition to making it easy for Donna and her friends to share answers, such assignments also rely on the most basic level of rote recall of facts. Different assignments, such as writing an essay, constructing an experiment, doing an oral presentation, would not only demand that students participate more in the learning process, they also demand higher level thinking skills. But they also require more teacher time, and the school administrations' willingness to give up the unnecessary control they sometimes have on what is taught in the

schools and how it is evaluated. For example, in the middle-school in which I observed, science teachers were required to use xeroxed modules: basically study questions which corresponded to available textbooks. One science teacher would occasionally have the students work on other projects or do experiments, but he kept quiet about it because the administration insisted on adhering to the modules, which he saw as out-dated and not sparking any interest in the students.

I also observed instances which demonstrate the girls' feelings about the schools as adversarial. One of the girls favorite activities at Girls Incorporated was to "play school". I walked into a room one day to find Yvonne playing teacher, with four of her friends playing students. The students were sitting at a table facing a blackboard which had a multiple-digit multiplication problem on it. Yvonne was slapping a ruler on the table and yelling at the "students", telling them to be quiet and put their heads down on their desks, and "not even think about talking back." When I asked if their teachers behaved like that, Yvonne quickly responded "Oh yes!," while one of the "students" said, "some of them."

However accurate a perception of their teachers and school this may be, I think it illustrates the girls' perception of their learning experience as adversarial: being yelled at, being told to not even think about speaking. It demonstrates the girls' lack of connection with their educational experiences, and feeling belittled. Recent research conducted by the American Association of University Women through the Wesley College Center for Research on Women (How Schools Shortchange Girls:1992) has shown that the self-esteem of girls is lowered as they continue in school. This process is particularly acute in the middle-school years. Throughout the educational process, girls of all backgrounds begin to doubt their abilities and settle for "safe" classes and activities which do not further risk their sense of self. Interviews with the girls and my observations of their school experiences, illustrate many of the factors described in research about gender and class. The girls feel no real connection or involvement in their educational process. For whatever reasons, the administration and

teachers don't have high expectations or standards for the students, and the students further compound the situation by just doing as much work as is necessary to "get through."

Donna seems to have some awareness of the situation in which she finds herself. While getting good grades at a school which was described by a parent as "being on the state's shit list", Donna was aware that her school might not be challenging her as it should. In an interview she told me:

> It's easy when you go to a school where everybody else is stupid. It makes you look smart. Makes you look like Einstein. That reminds me. My favorite line when people start getting on my case and they start saying things about me and I say I'm Einstein and that makes me smarter then every one of you guys.

SS You think you're smarter than most of the rest of them?

Donna Yeah, I hang around with the smart girls. There's a group of us.

SS Do you think it would be different in another school?

Donna Probably. Another school would be better, like Park Avenue, from what I hear from other kids. Stanley Street stinks.

While Donna is aware of the limitations of her school, and unlike Betty has a social group which supports her academic achievements, she still engages in behaviors such as sharing homework and test answers to "get through the work". In another school setting Donna might have to change her habits to maintain the good grades of which she is so proud. In her present situation it is unlikely she will develop the necessary skills to achieve her goal of becoming a pediatrician.

While proud of her achievements, Donna doesn't seem to relate them to her career aspirations. In fact she puts her achievements and aspirations in a domestic frame. Later in the interview she told me:

Boys think they're all macho, they think
they got all the muscles and they can do
do anything in the world.
But girls actually do,
I think girls do more work, cause
they think that women have to cook
and raise kids.
Well, it takes a lot to cook and raise
kids, takes more then going around with
big hammers and practically killing your back.

Donna is in the position of many women in our society who see value and strength in the invalidated role of mother and caregiver. Perhaps that is why she wants to be a pediatrician. In Hard Choices (1985), Katherine Gerson maintains that not all women experience social acculturation in the same way, and that many women hold contradictory views about their abilities and careers. I believe the interview with Donna illustrates some of these contradictions as experienced by a teen.

These contradictions are further illustrated by the unrealistic career goals and the educational experiences and skills which are required for those careers. For example, high school junior Linda told me she wanted to be a nurse, yet she was taking no math, science or appropriate vocational classes. When I asked her if she knew what classes or skills she would need for this career, she said no. One week her friend Dee told me she wanted to be a computer programmer, and the following week that she wanted to be a restaurant cook. While this type of change in career aspirations is expected in younger children, high school juniors need to start making some choices and decisions about possible careers. The situation was particularly acute for Dee who is disabled. I don't think she considered the implications of being on her feet all day as a cook. Teens whose parents have professional careers are better able to help their children start planning for and making decisions about how to prepare for careers. Working-class parents, however, often feel they have had little control over the course of their jobs or careers. This is particularly true for women (Gerson:1985). Like their parents, the working-

class teens do not perceive jobs or careers as a process that can be planned for or developed. And because the schools still tend to view these youngsters as less capable or destined for low-skill jobs, they don't make the needed interventions.

Perhaps because of the growing number of women doctors and lawyers on television, many girls mentioned these as career choices, but again without realistic ideas about how to achieve these goals or what they entail. Connie, a bright but volatile eight-grader told me she wanted to be a surgeon because they make a lot of money and didn't work hard. When I told her surgeons were on call evenings and weekends and frequently worked well beyond a forty-hour work week, she replied, "Oh no, they take off on Wednesdays and Saturdays to play golf".

On the one hand the girls get the message that these are careers to which they should aspire, but on the other hand they don't know what is required. The girls appear to be as disconnected from career options as they are from the educational processes which will achieve them, and they seem to think one career is the same as another.

Our educational system values middle-class behavior and attitudes, and tries to instill these values in children, who for whatever reasons of difference, are perceived as not having them. These expectations for girls include being a quiet, well-behaved student who doesn't make too many demands on the teacher. For working-class students, including girls, these behaviors are not valued. When a staff member at Girls Incorporated told a group that she had never heard such loud girls before, Yvonne quickly responded, "Well, you have now." Despite the changes Betty wanted to make in her life, she told me she was not and did not want to be a "yup".

There is a tendency in applying educational research to see commonalties even when examining distinctions. Gilligan (1982) and Belenky (1986), for example, have been criticized for making generalizations about all women as learners, knowers and moral agents, when in fact, there are distinctions based on race, class and other factors. Some say the categories of race and class may give women more common experiences with men from the same racial or class

background than with other women. I would not go so far. I believe gender bias, overlaid with racial and class discriminations compound to make essentially different experiences for women than men.

The working-class is typically viewed as being patriarchal. So much so, that even research into class difference is focused on males, while girls and young women are pathologized as juvenile delinquents. Weis contends that the patriarchy of the working-class further compounds the obstacles working-class girls and women must overcome (1990). Historically, working-class women have worked in the wage-labor force and contributed to family incomes, but their work is underpaid, demeaned and seen as secondary and temporary. The sought-after ideal is a middle-class situation in which the husband works and the wife/mother stays home. However, these are no longer middle-class ideals, and are in fact no longer financially feasible for most American families. In education, jobs, and idealized, sought-after life-styles, working-class girls and women find themselves trying to catch-up in a constantly changing world of middle-class standards, behaviors and attitudes.

I think Betty should be allowed her decision not to be a "yup." However, this decision should not affect her experiences, aspirations, or quality of education. Betty may not ever think highly of the "yup" representatives of the middle-class in her school, but the school must make the necessary changes to ensure that she receives an education equal to theirs and society must permit her to have equal opportunities.

We must, as a society recognize that children receive unequal education and opportunities based on factors like gender, race and class; and take steps to rectify these situations. Remedies should include equal funding for schools irrespective of where they are located, which students they serve, or the property tax-base which supports them. Also needed is the recognition of bias in teaching resources and methods, as well as the very structure of too many schools. I would also recommend smaller schools and classes; and curriculum and program changes which include hands-on experiences and active participation. It is simply too easy for students to sit back without ever being involved in the process of education.

We recognize that children with disabilities require additional educational funds and resources to level the educational and occupational playing fields. But there are other disadvantages, those created by socio-cultural conditions such as poverty, gender, and racial bias. If we look beyond the essential inequity of the situation, can the United States continue to educate large and growing percentages of its population in a manner which does not permit academic or occupational success, achievement and self-sufficiency?

The types of jobs for which working-class women and men are prepared exist in smaller and smaller numbers, and don't provide economic self-sufficiency (Bureau of Labor Statistics 1981: Tables 657 and 658). Children, and especially girls, who attend schools which still stress rote learning, adherence to authority, and do not demand more academically of students, cannot compete for jobs and careers that require abstract and critical thinking skills. Further, children coming from socio-cultural backgrounds which see no connection between education and work, or any other aspect of everyday life, are not able to fully participate and contribute to society.

Betty may never become a "yup", but given a different school situation she can have an education and opportunities which will challenge her to her fullest potential, and society will benefit from the contributions she can make.

Note: The names of all girls who participated in this study have been changed.

REFERENCES

Apple, M. (1979). *Ideology and Curriculum*. London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul.

American Association of University Women. (1992). *How Schools Shortchange Girls*. Wellseley College Center for Research on Women.

Belenky,M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N. & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's Ways of Knowing*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Bureau of the Census. (1992). *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (1981). *Employment and Unemployment: A Report on 1980*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor.

Foley,D. (1990). *Learning Capitalistic Culture Deep in the Heart of Tejaz*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gerson, K. (1985). *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In A Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ladner, J. (1971). *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books.

MacLeod, J. (1987). *Ain't No Making It*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

McDermott, R. (1987). Achieving School Failure: An Anthropological Approach to Illiteracy and Social Stratification. In G. Spindler (Ed.) *Education and Cultural Process: Anthropological Approaches* (pp.173-209). Prospect Heights, NJ: Waveland Press.

Tjossem, T. (1974). *Intervention Strategies for High Risk Infants and Young Children*. Baltimore: University Park Press.

Weis,L. (1990). *Working Class Without Work*. New York: Routledge.

Willis, P. (1977) . *Learnging To Labor*. Aldershor: Gower.